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HISTORY

About Ginans.org

The Ginan Study group during the past nine years has been involved in six International Conferences. The first conference was organised by Mr A Rahmatoullah of ***the Society of Ismaili Studies*** with co-sponsorship of the ***Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (Sorbonne)*** and the ***North Gujarat University (Patan)*** at the French Riviera in April 2002; followed by the second in collaboration with and at the location of the ***University of Saurastra Rajkot India*** in November 2004; and the third entitled ***'Devotional Expressions of South Asian Muslims'*** organised by The Institute of Ismaili Studies at the Ismaili Centre London in November 2006; the fourth was held in London in June 2007 when the Association for the Study of Ginans was formally established; the fifth conference was held in London in October 2009; and the last one entitled ***'Sounds and Spaces of Muslim Piety: Tradition and Transformation'*** was co-sponsored with the ***Canadian Centre for Ethnomusicology at the University of Alberta*** in Edmonton.

The aims and objectives of the Association are to promote, study, research, publish and create awareness of the Ginans; to provide information, advice and support including resources and financial support to individual scholars and non-scholars who seek to study Ginans; organise meetings; work in harmony and with collaboration wherever possible with external bodies, including Imamati Institutions and places of higher learning.

What are Ginans?

The Satpanth Ismaili Muslims of South Asia have a beautiful tradition of religious poetry called Ginans which they have sung for many centuries in daily rituals. This small Shi'a community has spread form India to other contintents, but it has held fast to the practice of singing Ginans.

Composed in Indian languages and idiom, the Ginans illustrate how Muslims were influenced by the surrounding cultures and philosophies, and created new ways of expressing their beliefs and values. Although this living tradition of religious songs is central to Ismaili practice, only a handful of studies have delt with the subject.

Religious Heritage

The Ginan tradition of the Ismaili Muslims, who are also known as the Satpanthi or Khoja Ismailis in India and Pakistan, is a rich and remarkable poetic heritage that has remained unfamiliar to scholars of Bhakti, Sant and Indo-Muslim literature. Shia Ismailism persisted in its brilliant intellectual tradition as well as its missionary efforts long after its political and cultural ascendancy during the Fatimid empire in Egypt (909-1130 CE), and in spite of several internal schisms. In particular, the Nizari branch of Ismailism founded in 1094 CE in Alamut by the Ismaili dai, Hasan-e Sabbah, who affirmed Nizar the elder son of Imam al-Mustansir as the Imams rightful successor, inaugurated a new phase of the spread and renewal of Ismailism.

The entry of Ismaili ideas into the Indian subcontinent in the form of Satpanth was spurred under the leadership of the Nizari Ismaili branch that, despite its changing fortunes, never ceased its efforts until the nineteenth century to teach and recruit followers to its interpretation of Shia Islam.

The Ginan tradition is recognized by the Satpanth Ismailis as their devotional, sacred texts, at one time the equivalent in guidance and authority for them, as indicated in their songs, to the Quran and the Vedas. It encompasses a major corpus of hymns composed in the vernacular languages of India, including Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, Sindhi, Kacchi, and Siraiki. The word Ginan (ginana) itself is derived from the Sanskrit jnana and conveys the meaning of sacred, gnostic knowledge. For a long time, these sacred hymns were known only to the initiates of the Satpanth Khoja community.

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Real Patidar's mission is to organize the information on Satpanth religion, which is a Nizari Ismaili sect of Shia branch of Islam, and to make it universally accessible and useful. Real Patidar Books helps readers discover the material on Satpanth online while helping authors and researchers in their studies. You can know more by visiting http://www.realpatidar.com

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Some members called Guptis maintained their Hindu affiliations but inwardly observed Satpanth teachings and thus kept their Ismaili identity hidden (gupta). Ginans are sung just like the devotional Bhakti songs of the Sants of northern India, and their poetry and intensity render them one of the great mystical poetic literatures of the Indian subcontinent. Their form, style and content resembles that of medieval and pre-modern Bhakti poetry; conversely, their unique characteristics find sympathy among several contemporary Hindu communities in Gujarat and Rajasthan. From this, one
might infer a much wider affiliation to Satpanth Ismailism in medieval times than is indicated by the boundaries of the present Khoja community.

At first transmitted orally, the Ginans are believed to have been written down from the sixteenth century onwards in a corpus gathered by Pir Dadu who died in 1593 CE, but the earliest extant manuscript dates from 1736 CE.

The Ginan manuscript tradition uses a specially designed secret alphabet called Khojki (khojaki) that was derived from a shorthand script in use by Lohana merchants in Sindh and Kutch.

The Ginans left the restricted circles of the Khoja Ismaili community when, at the end of the nineteenth century, a major event interrupted the reticent ways of the

Satpanthis, namely, the arrival of their Imam Hasan Ali Shah, the first Aga Khan, from Persia in 1846 CE to Bombay where he settled. Efforts to secure the recognition of the Aga Khan I by his followers, and to unite his scattered Indian community under English colonial power, made it necessary to collect, research and bring to the notice of the public judicial authorities relevant texts of the Ginans that established the Imams authority This is when the Ginans importance as literary testimony of a deep-rooted religious community began to be officially acknowledged.

Academic interest in the Ginan tradition was stimulated in the middle of the twentieth century by the important and prolific writings of the Russian scholar Wladimir Ivanov on different branches of the Ismailis. Gradually, during the last five decades but not as sufficiently as it deserves to be the special nature of Satpanth literature and its place in the Indian subcontinent has emerged as a fascinating example of an Islamic religious
movement expressing itself within a local Indian religious culture to guide seekers into the heart of divine revelation.

Given the unique nature of the Ginans, the increasing interest in them both among academic specialists and community members, and the research work that remains to be done on this relatively unexplored spiritual heritage, it seemed appropriate to organize a conferences on Ginans.

Ginans were first written down in Khojki script. The Gujarati script replaced the Khojki script in the twentieth century, and was used for the official canonical versions produced by the compiler Mukhi Lalji Devraj, and printed by the Khoja Sindhi Press in Bombay. Gujarati script is still in use among Khoja Ismaili communities in South Asia, however, editions of more commonly recited Ginans also exist in Arabo-Persian and Roman transliteration. As specialists in Khojki have shown, transliteration from the Khojki script is itself an inexact exercise.

Extracts from the Preface: Ginans Texts and Contexts edited by Tazim R. Kassam and Françoise Mallison

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